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TAGS: PREF PBTS WI AG MO

SUBJECT: UNHCR DEPUTY JOHNSTONE BRIEFS AMBASSADOR ON SAHARA
AND REFUGEES IN MOROCCO

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner Craig Johnstone, at the end of a regional tour, told Ambassador Riley UNHCR can live with the imprecise number for Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf Camps. He said UN agencies get around the dispute by counting both the number of rations (reflecting a donor estimate) and of supplemental rations, which gives a higher total, placating Algeria and the Polisario. He discounted the possibility of major diversion of food aid. Johnstone, a former U.S. Ambassador to Algeria, personally speculated that it might be possible to sell some form of "extreme autonomy" to the Polisario. He was engaged in promoting the CBM program. On Morocco, UNHCR's local chief said there are only 800 registered refugees, growing by less than 200 per year. The GOM needed to have legislation that would establish a procedure and responsible authority for asylum for refugees. End Summary.

¶12. (U) Ambassador Riley and Polcouns met visiting UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees Craig Johnstone at latter's request April 4. Johnstone, a former U.S. Ambassador to Algeria, was joined by his chief of staff and UNHCR Morocco head of Mission Johann Van der Klaauw. Johnstone had just flown in from Laayoune and before that Tindouf, having seen the Sahrawi refugees and Polisario leaders, and from Algiers. He was here for the ceremonial opening of the UNHCR office in Rabat, the mission here having only in the last year received formal recognition from the GOM.

Saharan Refugees in Tindouf: The Number Problem

¶13. (SBU) Ambassador Riley raised the question of the number of refugees in the camps in Tindouf. With such a stable population, why was it so difficult to get a real count? Pointing to a related article in that morning's newspaper, he asked, were international donations being diverted?

¶14. (C) Johnstone acknowledged the precise number was controversial, even though there is no dispute regarding the order of magnitude. The Algerians claimed 135,000. European donors had counted the number of tents in an aerial photograph multiplying by a surveyed number of persons per household, to yield 90,000. The way the UN got around the difference politically was that it supplies 90,000 rations

and 35,000 supplementary rations, saying only it is supplying 125,000 rations. This satisfies the Polisario and the Algerians. Even with the supplementary rations, however, there are clearly nutritional problems in the camps. Anemia is widespread among the children, and Johnstone said he was going to ensure that the UN took steps to address this. While it was true that some diverted commodities had found their ways into public markets, this was not at all unusual in refugee situations. Recipients often trade received commodities for other essentials, like yeast, which is not part of the donated food basket, but is needed to turn the donated flour into bread. This was more a problem for WFP than UNHCR, which programmatically was responsible principally for medical assistance and education in the camps. The UNHCR assistance budget for the refugees in Tindouf was only USD 3 million. The Government of Spain contributes some USD 9 million.

Veteran Reflections on Addressing the Sahara Dispute

¶ 15. (SBU) UNHCR is also responsible for the UN's humanitarian Confidence Building Measures (CBM) program of exchange visits (and telephone exchanges) between the refugees in Algeria and their family members in Western Sahara. As to the CBM's themselves, Johnstone said he would be trying to promote the implementation of the agreement at Manhasset that there be land-based exchanges, which would enable more family members to benefit. Ambassador noted continuing strong USG support for the program.

¶ 16. (C) In trying to continue and strengthen the CBM program, Johnstone said he had been peripherally discussing the political dispute over Western Sahara, although this was not

part of the UNHCR mandate. While the Polisario leaders had continued to insist that their situation remained strictly one of decolonization, and they had a right to a referendum on independence, he thought it might be possible to work through this rhetoric. It had been clear over the years that Morocco would not give up the Sahara. Perhaps a referendum could be proposed that, while not offering a chance to vote for outright independence, could contain an option for something a bit less that could meet minimal Moroccan needs, such as one king - two countries, or some other "extreme form of autonomy." He recalled that during his time in Algiers, he had met King Hassan II and then Ambassador to Morocco Nassif, in a ultimately successful effort to promote a gas transit pipeline through Morocco.

The Refugee Situation in Morocco

¶ 17. (SBU) UNHCR Mission Chief Van der Klaauw noted that the formal recognition from the GOM, which allowed UNHCR to operate more freely as a diplomatic mission in Morocco, and more formally, had in practice turned out to be somewhat of a mixed blessing. He had formerly been able to obtain residency permits from the Consular Section of the MFA. Now that the GOM recognized UN refugee documents, the MFA officials were on a sort of technical strike, not issuing any permits. This should now shift either to the Ministry of the Interior or some other, perhaps hybrid, domestic government body. UNHCR had taken Moroccan officials to some European countries to see how asylum applicants were processed there. And it had offered a proposed skeleton draft for the necessary legislation. In the meantime, he was unable to get work permits for those to whom UNHCR had granted asylum. Instead UNHCR was sponsoring entrepreneurial training and micro loans so they could work in the informal sector, a la Morocaine, which he said the authorities were tolerating.

¶ 18. (U) Van der Klaauw asserted the refugee population is not large. There are only 800 certified refugees in Morocco. He was using prescreening to turn away many economic migrant candidates. Of the 80 applications accepted per month, UNHCR only granted status to some 20 percent. And this had been

stable over the past two years. UNHCR does not provide financial support for the refugees, except for some 30-40 cases of widows, or children. Some Moroccan NGOs also help. Over the past few years, the most applicants were Congolese and Iraqis (although their numbers had diminished recently - now only 14 - 16 percent), and Nigerians, who are essentially economic migrants and are all rejected. He said the number of refugee applications in other countries in the region, Algeria and Mauritania were about the same.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: Due to his experience and interest in North Africa, it can be expected that Johnstone may well take a more active part in the Sahara situation, at least by putting the force of his office behind successful CBM's. End Comment.

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Riley